

The Origin and Nature of the Periphrastic Verb "Do" in Middle and Early Modern English

Val Kirstlin

The modern construction "Do you want to eat?" is a degenerate form of the semantically empty "do" that became common in Middle English.

The modern English dummy verb "do," evidenced in negatives, interrogatives, affirmatives, and tag questions, is derived from a periphrastic verb "do" of Middle and Early Modern English. Yet the origin of that now-archaic "do" is uncertain and controversial. The periphrastic "do" was a superfluous tense-carrier, semantically empty yet widely used.

The Origin of Periphrastic "Do"

The major theories of the origin of the periphrastic "do" are three:

1) It was derived from the influence of the corresponding use of "faire" in

French.

2) It developed out of the Old English causative "do."

3) It derived from semantic development of the full factitive verb "do."

I. French Influence

The possible origin of the periphrastic "do" from French "faire" is mentioned curtly with a reference in Kellner (p. 221), and refuted briefly in Visser (p. 1496). The French verb "faire" was normally used in the manner of OE causative "do." Periphrastic use of the verb was uncommon, and its acceptability questionable. It is unlikely that it might have influenced English. Visser concludes that the cases in which "faire" is used in a periphrastic way suggest borrowing from English into French rather than the other way around.

II. From Causative "Do"

As in Modern English, OE had a verb "to do" meaning "to perform;" this is the main verb "to do." Traugott traces the periphrastic verb from this main verb. The OE causative "to do" was derived from the main verb, and its usage is shown in these examples:

OE	Ioseph ... did gader saricantz and squier ¹
OE	First he did his graf to deluen ¹
ME	He ded Davy sadillyn an oder hors ²

The causative sentence takes the form:

[subject] [caused] [someone or something]
[verb phrase]

The practice of deleting the object of the causing of indefinite (as in the OE examples) was continued into ME.

Traugott believes that this deletion rule was the ultimate source of periphrastic “do.” If “I did saddle a horse” could represent “I did someone saddle a horse,” the causative nature of the verb “to do” is open to reinterpretation, specifically when such forms as “I wanted to do it” (in which the subject of the complement and of the main verb are the same) are coexistent with the causative form.

According to Traugott, the affirmative “do” arose from this (apparently) equivocal situation. By late ME, use of “to do” with preverbal object signified causative, while “to do” with postverbal object was taken as affirmative or emphatic.

“I did them pay” is usually interpreted ... as “I caused them to be paid”; while “I did pay them” is interpreted as “I say I truly paid them.”³

When used redundantly with adverbs such as “truly,” this structure is again equivocal, leaving open the interpretation of “to do” as a meaningless tense carrier.

Hence, Traugott traces periphrastic “do” as:

Main verb “perform”
Causative “to cause”
Affirmative “truly”
Periphrastic

This genealogy relies heavily upon the assumption that the phrase type “I did saddle a horse” was equivocal to the speakers. Visser contends (p. 1496) that not only is the number of examples small where the “do” phrase is equivocal, but that the speakers may not have found these examples ambiguous, relying on the written context and the physical situation being described to clarify.

Visser also quotes from and refutes a theory by Ellegard which also derives periphrastic “do” from the

causative “to do.” The argument concerns as an example a quote from Robert of Brunne’s translation of Langtoft’s *Chronicle*:

“Henry ... pe walles did doun felle”

Ellegard argues that if fell is non-causative (fell₁ = “fell with one’s own hands”) then do₁ must be causative. But if fell (fell₂ = “cause others to fell”) is causative, then do₂ may be non-causative, and thus becomes the periphrastic “to do.” The problem as Visser sees it is in the interpretation of “fell” as causative: there is no data to support this interpretation of the verb, and the number of such verb types necessary to cause the shift to periphrastic “do” is not represented in the literature.

Hence, of the major arguments for causative to periphrastic “do,” neither is totally satisfactory. The two forms “The king did build a wall” and “The king did fall” were coexistent in ME, and were apparently of the same age.⁴ The latter type is unambiguous; the former’s meaning would be determined by the situation. It is not clear how the development of the periphrastic “do” can be explained, if it evolved from the causative verb of the first of these two types.

III. From Factitive “Do”

The OE verb “don” was a factitive verb. The direct object may have been in the form of a noun, pronoun, finite verb, *’pæt*-form, imperative, or verbal. It was common in OE to use infinitives as objects of verbs (owing to their original nominative character), hence it is not surprising to find them used as the subject of “don.” Partially because some of the later uses to which “don” would be put produced (at this stage) nothing more expressive than the shorter forms, and partially because the tendency toward analytic rather than inflectional structures was still developing,⁵ the only examples of periphrastic-type use of “don” occur with anticipatory “do”+infinitive:

Woman why dois ’pou ’pus to make vs
more myscheue?⁶

And do as adversaries do in law, Strive
mightily, but eat and drink as friends⁶

Do as the carrion does, not as the
flower, corrupt with virtuous season⁷

The worth of these examples is to show that by removing the words between “do” and the infinitive (except for the subject, if it intervenes) and reducing the stress on “do,” we get the periphrastic construction:

Woman why dois ’pou to make vs more

¹ Quoted in Visser, p. 1346

² Quoted in Traugott, p. 140

³ Traugott, p. 140

⁴ Visser, p. 1497

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1490

⁶ Quoted in Visser, p. 1491

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1492

periphrastic "to do" in positive declarative sentences began to die out. Prior to that time it was widely used, interchangeably with the simpler form Tense+Verb. As late as 1818, some grammarians wrote that periphrastic "do" was a standard alternate to the simple form, but others denounced its use in any but emphatic, interrogative, and negative sentences. By mid-18th century it was obsolete.

The decline of "do" may have been due to the wide public literary criticism of writers, and feelings that "do" was superfluous. Visser suggests (p. 1511) that the declarative "he did go" was not able to maintain itself neighboring the emphatic "he did go" with an emphatic "do." The fact that this conflict would not occur in the negative form "he did not

go" (where the emphasis would be on the negative regardless) may explain the existence of dummy "do" in negatives, and lends credence to the idea.

The standard interrogative inversion in ME of "you saw it" was "saw you it?" When the periphrastic was widely used, the interrogative inversion would naturally have been "did you see it?" When the declarative form began to disappear, the pressures causing that extinction would again not apply to the interrogative, and it remains the primary form of questions, having won out in the 18th and 19th centuries against the older form without "do."

For a discussion of question types still formed without "do," see Visser (p. 1544).

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